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Fatal Wave

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Fatal Wave

By Geoffrey Reynolds

There's a phenomenon on the Great Lakes that sailors rarely feel, but shoreline residents dread. Called a "seiche," it happens when a wide wave builds due to seismic or atmospheric disturbances, creating huge fluctuations in water levels in just moments.

The earliest one recorded at Holland, Michigan happened in August 1917. But the most tragic occurred in July 1938.



Ottawa Beach sunbathers did not suspect that a set of killer waves was coming their way. Courtesy of the Joint Archives of Holland.

Wednesday, July 13, 1938 began quietly enough at Ottawa Beach in Holland State Park. Lake Michigan was absolutely calm and the sky was clear at 5:00 a.m. Then, 10 minutes later, the first of many 10-foot waves raced ashore, pushing water 75 to 100 feet farther up the beach than usual. Coast Guard watchmen recorded the odd—and what they assumed was isolated—event. No warning was issued.

By 7:00 a.m., a stillness had returned to the shore and, though the sky was overcast, beachgoers began to gather. While bathers played in the water, a second set of waves, spurred by a strong westerly squall line, had already started its journey from the Wisconsin side of the lake. As the waves traveled east toward Holland, they continued to build in height until—at approximately 3:45 p.m.—they crashed against the breakwater. Surprised by the sudden surge of water, 15 people standing on the manmade wall were forced to cling to a navigational beacon or scramble back onto the breakwater after being swept off.

Before the sun would set, this inland tsunami, or “seiche” (pronounced *says-h*), would take a terrible toll on the shoreline community.

A Daring Rescue

A huge amount of water, which had been “piled” against the Wisconsin shoreline two days earlier by an easterly storm, had returned to the east with a vengeance.

Bathers like the Fabiano sisters, Josephine and Esther, were pulled down as they swam in shallow water. From Esther’s recollection:

“My sister Josephine and I decided to walk really quite close to shore then decided to swim to the breakwater. [Our sister] Louise did not want to go with us, so she stayed on the shore. We weren’t very far before the undertow felt just like somebody had taken our legs. We started yelling for help until I remember being hit right in the face with a large wave and being knocked out. Josephine remained conscious but thought for sure we were going to drown. Josephine later told me that when Harold Jennings came for us, she couldn’t believe it was true, but thought it only a hallucination.”

As the eight- to 10-foot waves battered 16-year-old Esther and 20-year-old Josephine, they were rendered helpless by the undertow pulling them beneath the surface. Lifeguards tried to respond. But their small rescue boat foundered in the

heavy surf. Luckily, Grand Rapids resident Harold Jennings spotted them as he struggled to control his boat in the wake of the surge. He jumped from the boat, then swam about 200 feet and located both girls under the surface of the lake. Said Esther:

"He pulled us in by the hair. He said I fought all the way, because when the wave hit me it made me very angry like someone had slapped me in the face. He told us that Josephine had tried to help me but passed out. Then the Coast Guard came, and they helped us as soon as we reached the shore since Harold was utterly exhausted. I didn't wake up until we got home, even while they were working on saving me. Josephine said she came to on the beach with my sister Louise between us."

"I remember the day quite clearly," said Louise:

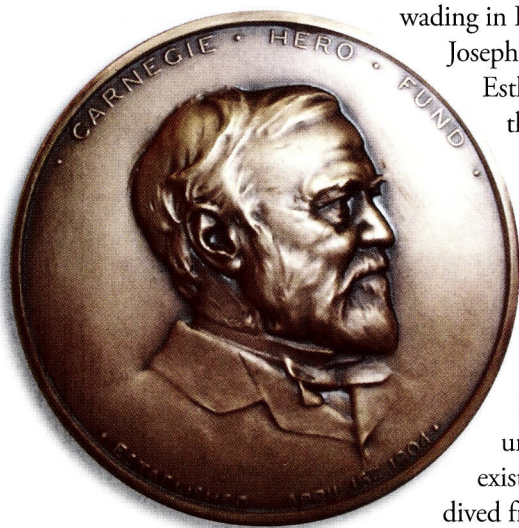
"Me and my two sisters went to Ottawa Beach and the water was rough, even though there were no signs warning us. I decided to stay on the beach and get some sun, whereas my sisters decided they would walk along the beach. A few minutes later I heard this commotion and realized that someone was drowning. But then I realized it was my two sisters out there, and before I knew it, they were out of the water and people were working on giving them artificial respiration. I sat between them while people around us were saying, 'Oh, she's a goner, this one is a goner.' I always thought that it was the undertow that day even though they were only wading in one or two feet of water because it was so rough, but they ended up out near the end of the pier. I prayed I wouldn't have to go home and tell my parents that they were gone."

Louise Fabiano (left) feared that rescuers would not be able to revive her sisters Esther and Josephine. Courtesy of the Joint Archives of Holland.

Said Esther, "I always wondered what happened to our hero after that. He came and visited us a couple of days later to see how we were, but we never heard from him again." In fact, Harold Jennings had been nominated for, and eventually received, the Carnegie Medal in October 1939 for voluntarily risking his own life while saving the Fabiano sisters. His citation read:

"Harold L. Jennings, 24, meter reader, saved Josephine R. and Esther C. Fabiano, 20 and 16, respectively, from drowning, Ottawa Beach, Michigan, July 13, 1938. While





wading in Lake Michigan, Josephine and her sister Esther were swept from their footing and drifted in a strong undertow to water seven-feet deep, three hundred feet from shore. Waves were five-feet high and heavy because of unusual conditions existing. Jennings dived from a boat and then swam about two hundred

feet to the girls and got hold of their hair. The girls were unconscious. With great difficulty Jennings then swam toward shore, the undertow hindering his progress. He called for help, and he was gasping. After having swum two hundred feet with the girls, he reached shallower water and was given assistance. The girls were revived. Jennings was fatigued and nauseated."

Tragedy to the North

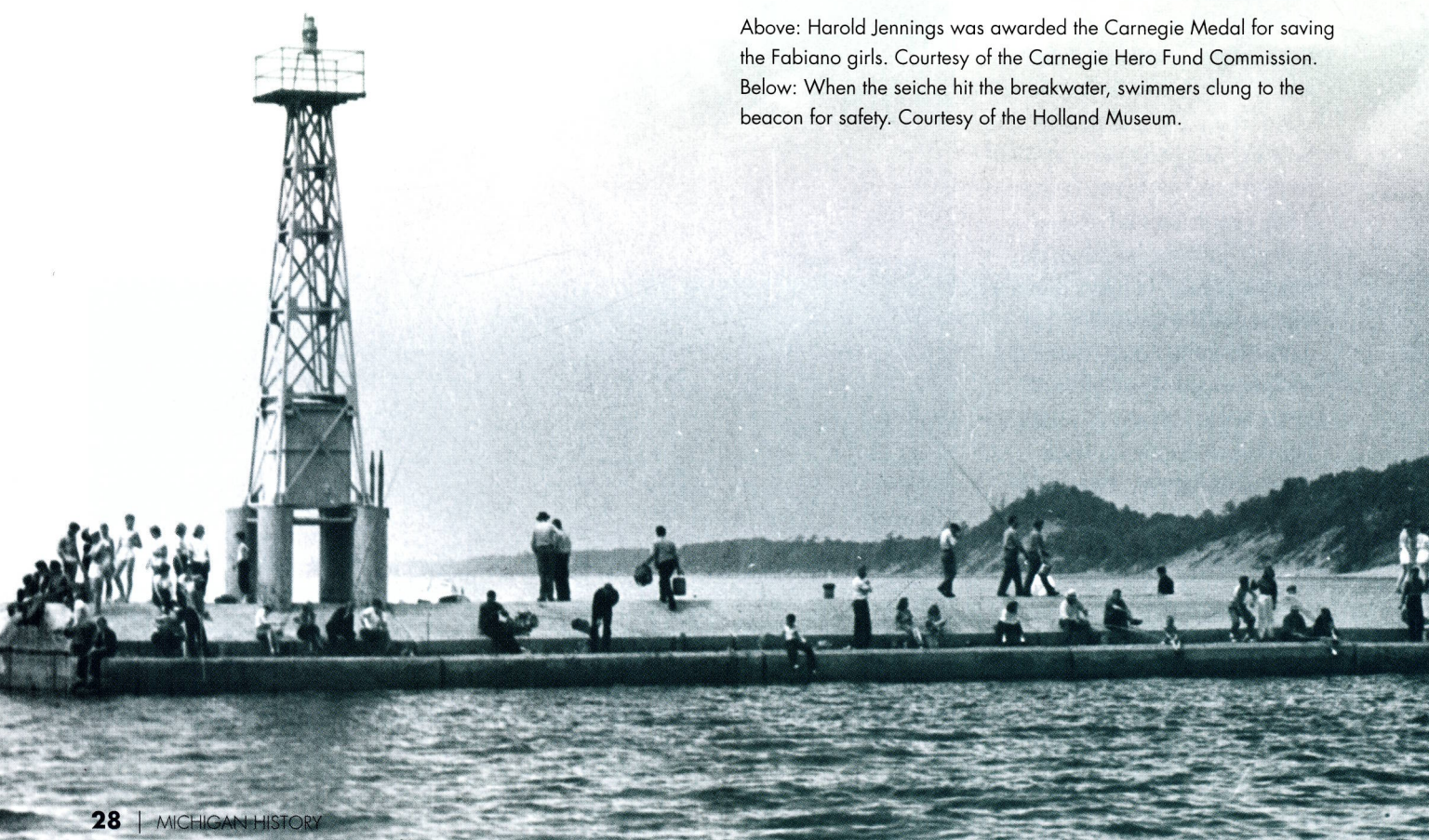
While the drama at Ottawa Beach was unfolding, the seiche had already taken the lives of three others a little farther north. The first two victims were 18-year-old Catherine Schutt and 19-year-old Ruth Riksen.

The young women, who were employed as domestics at nearby cottages, waded in the heavy surf at Tennessee Beach. Soon after they entered the water, large waves and the subsequent undertow pulled them out into the lake. As stunned bystanders watched, Schutt and Riksen were swept beneath the churning water. Almost a half dozen would-be rescuers nearly died with them.

The news from Tennessee Beach quickly spread into town. A sister of Schutt's, working nearby, was alerted to the tragedy and relayed the news to her widowed mother. The next day, the young woman's body was recovered.

Ruth Riksen's body was recovered Saturday by vacationers, after her father and three brothers conducted a dawn-to-night vigil along the beach. A third victim of that day, 34-year-old Herbert J. Brouwer of Grand Rapids, was pulled to his death at Holland's Tunnel Park.

In a sad addendum to the Holland story, Oscar Thorsen and canoeist John D. Lent Jr. also lost their lives to what



Above: Harold Jennings was awarded the Carnegie Medal for saving the Fabiano girls. Courtesy of the Carnegie Hero Fund Commission.
Below: When the seiche hit the breakwater, swimmers clung to the beacon for safety. Courtesy of the Holland Museum.



Eighteen-year-old Catherine Schutt could not escape the undertow at Tennessee Beach. Courtesy of the Joint Archives of Holland.

one newspaper called “high freak waves” at Bronson City Park (near Muskegon) and at the public beach at Pentwater, respectively.

Precautions Taken

In the wake of the July 13 death toll, Holland State Park officials redoubled their efforts to remind swimmers to heed warnings when given and to swim within patrolled areas. The Holland paper also reported that the city’s common council had appointed a committee, made up of members from the U.S. Coast Guard, state park authorities, Ottawa County Board of Supervisors, and city officials, to study the seiche and to propose precautions to prevent future drownings. Ideas included posting poles along the beach at set intervals with a line and life preserver attached that could be thrown to bathers in distress. Ironically, these same safety devices had been instituted at Grand Haven in 1929, after its most tragic day at the beach. (See sidebar.)

Today, the state park beach in Holland is marked with buoys and water condition flags. Additionally, a small rescue boat is moored near the boardwalk, in readiness for the next time the dreaded seiche comes to shore.

Geoffrey Reynolds is the director of the Joint Archives of Holland, located at Hope College.

GRAND HAVEN SUFFERED THROUGH A SEICHE, TOO

On July 4, 1929, more than 45,000 people gathered at Grand Haven State Park to celebrate the national holiday with a day at the beach. An early morning storm spawned a seiche that kicked up large waves; one swept a 16-year-old Grand Rapids girl off the breakwater and into Lake Michigan, where she drowned.

A second seiche swept across the lake about five hours later, unleashing a wall of water that lashed the Grand Haven beach with 20-foot waves and a powerful undertow that pulled nine more people to their deaths.

“It was a quick and nasty sea,” according to a U.S. Coast Guard captain at the scene, who was quoted in the *Muskegon Chronicle* the next day. “For a short squall, it was one of the worst I’ve ever seen.”

Seiches can slosh back and forth across the Great Lakes for hours, depending on the weather conditions. For that reason, the National Weather Service recommends that people use caution when swimming in the Great Lakes or venturing out onto piers before or after a squall line passes through.

